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Peace and Retrenchment? The Edwardian Liberal Party, the Limits of Pacifism, and the Politics of National Defence

MATTHEW JOHNSON

The statesmen who took the fateful decision to commit Great Britain to war in Europe in August 1914 were in many respects an unlikely group of men to plunge their country into Armageddon. They were, after all, the leading representatives of a political party that had been swept to power eight years previously under the triumphant slogan of ‘Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform’. The paradox that men professing such ideals should take their nation into a conflict of unprecedented scale and destruction has long interested historians, and scholarship on the British road to war has accordingly focused not only on the strategic and diplomatic decisions taken by the government during the years before 1914 but also on the context of Liberal politics, ideas, and principles within which those decisions were taken.

A principal theme in these accounts has been the extent of radical Liberal unease about the direction of British foreign policy, and outright dismay at the spiralling costs of national and imperial defence during these years. Divisions within the Cabinet over diplomacy and defence planning have long been recognized. But in its essential outline, the historical narrative of Liberal politics and the coming of the Great War has most commonly been framed in terms of a struggle by radical backbench MPs, journalists, and intellectuals against a line of British policy that was seen as being driven either by an out-dated obsession with the European balance of power or by an aggressive and expansionary new capitalist colonialism. In this struggle the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, came in for a

considerable amount of criticism. But radical hostility was also directed more broadly against an arrogant and self-serving ‘governing class’ of officials, plutocrats, and armaments manufacturers, who supposedly shaped policy without regard to the best interests of the British democracy.¹

This perspective on Liberal politics during the years leading down to 1914 is undoubtedly an important one. Many Liberals had very real misgivings about the direction of British diplomacy during Grey’s tenure at the Foreign Office. The Anglo-Russian convention of 1907 not only aligned Britain with a reactionary power in the Near East, but also seemed to represent an unnecessarily confrontational stance towards Germany, which could now justifiably feel itself to have been ‘encircled’ by unfriendly powers in Europe.² Anglo-German relations reached a nadir with the Agadir Crisis of 1911, when European rivalries over Morocco seemingly brought the two nations to the brink of war. In this context, even the Entente Cordiale with France, which had initially been welcomed by Liberals anxious to be on good terms with the French Republic, came to be viewed as a sordid colonial bargain, typical of a new wave of expansionary imperialism whose long-term effects could only tend to increase tensions and the risk of war between the Great Powers. In the wake of the crisis, more than seventy backbench MPs, led by Arthur Ponsonby and Noel Buxton, set up a

¹ See e.g. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957), 95–131; A. J. A. Morris, *Radicalism Against War, 1906–1914: The Advocacy of Peace and Retrenchment* (London, 1972); Clive Trebilcock, ‘Radicalism and the Armament Trust’, in A. J. A. Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism, 1900–1914: Some Aspects of British Radicalism* (London, 1974), 180–201; Zara S. Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (2nd edn. Basingstoke, 2003), 150–1.

² David McLean, ‘English Radicals, Russia, and the Fate of Persia, 1907–1913’, *English Historical Review*, 93/367 (1987), 338–52.

Liberal Foreign Affairs Group to protest against the Foreign Office's handling of diplomacy and the poor state of relations with Germany.³

More alarming still to many Liberals was the rapid increase in the cost of armaments and national defence during these years. For all their talk of 'retrenchment', total British defence expenditure rose under the Liberal governments from £59.2 million in 1906 to £77.2 million by 1913.⁴ In absolute terms British defence expenditure by 1914 remained lower than that of Germany and Russia, yet by 1913/14 British defence spending as a proportion of total government expenditure was the highest in Europe.⁵ Per capita defence expenditure in Britain was also the highest among the European powers for most of the period between 1905 and 1912.⁶ Liberal opposition to this trend was manifest in efforts by backbench MPs and the radical press to persuade the government to push for a reduction in armaments at the international peace conference at The Hague in 1907, and in the establishment of a 'Reduction of Armaments Committee' in Parliament, which soon claimed the support of more than 100 MPs.⁷

³ Taylor, *Trouble Makers*, 118–22; Steiner and Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 150–1.

⁴ David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1996), 2.

⁵ Niall Ferguson, 'Public Finance and National Security: The Domestic Origins of the First World War Revisited', *Past and Present*, 142 (1994), 154.

⁶ Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, 6.

⁷ Howard Weinroth, 'Left-Wing Opposition to Naval Armaments in Britain before 1914', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6/4 (1971), 93–120; A. J. A. Morris, 'The English Radicals' Campaign for Disarmament and The Hague Conference of 1907', *Journal of*

When the July Crisis broke in 1914, Liberal opinion initially appeared overwhelmingly opposed to the prospect of war. The *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian* ran strong anti-war campaigns up until 4 August, and most of the provincial Liberal press expressed a firm preference for British neutrality in any European conflict. Similar sentiments were expressed by organizations such as the British Neutrality Committee organized by Graham Wallas and J. A. Hobson, and Norman Angell's Neutrality League, which distributed thousands of posters and hundreds of thousands of leaflets during the early days of August.⁸ Strong opposition to war was also evident within the Liberal Party at Westminster, including within the Cabinet, where John Morley and John Simon argued that the government should make an immediate declaration that in *no circumstances* would Great Britain become involved in a continental war. By the afternoon of 2 August the ministry appeared to be close to breaking up. Just two days later, however, the government formally declared war on Germany, with the resignations of only three ministers: John Burns (President of the Board of Trade), John Morley (Lord President of the Council), and Charles Trevelyan (Secretary to the Board of Education).⁹ The failure of the Neutrality campaign was

Modern History, 43/3 (1971), 367–93; Paul Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914* (Oxford, 2001), 171-3.

⁸ Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, 'The Mood in Britain in 1914', in Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Rott (eds.), *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2011), 68–9; Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), 16-25; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), 25–7.

⁹ M. Brock, 'Britain Enters the War', in Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann and R. J. W. Evans, *The Coming of the First World War* (Oxford, 1988), 156.

largely due to the speed with which the crisis developed. The rallying of a divided and initially sceptical Cabinet has often been attributed to the political skill with which Grey and H. H. Asquith, the Prime Minister, presented the case for intervention to their colleagues, and even to Liberal anxiety that failure to unite behind a decision for war might bring down the government and allow the formation of a Conservative or Tory-dominated war ministry.¹⁰

Important as it is to our understanding of pre-war politics, however, this narrative of radical opposition to armaments and war does not by itself tell the full story of Edwardian Liberal thinking about diplomacy, armed conflict, and defence policy. Liberal attitudes towards the problem of war were, in fact, remarkably ambivalent and fiercely contested during the early twentieth century. The Liberal Party had, of course, been bitterly divided over the war in South Africa that broke out in 1899. Whilst so-called ‘pro-Boers’ such as David Lloyd George, Wilfrid Lawson, and Henry Labouchere had been strongly opposed to the war, the ‘Liberal Imperialist’ faction within the party, which looked to Lord Rosebery for leadership, had been more supportive of Britain’s military efforts. Liberal Imperialists, including leading members of the Roseberyite Liberal League, took a number of key posts in the new Cabinet formed by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in December 1905. Asquith became Chancellor of the Exchequer, Grey took the Foreign Office, and Richard Haldane was appointed Secretary of State for War. The position of this group was further strengthened in 1908 when Asquith succeeded Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister, and by July 1911 Earl Loreburn, the Lord Chancellor, was of the opinion that the ministry was effectively ‘a Liberal League Government’.¹¹ The Liberal Imperialists were more prominent in the Cabinet

¹⁰ K. M. Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904–1914* (Cambridge, 1985), 141–5; Steiner and Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 246–53.

¹¹ Wilson, *Policy of the Entente*, 24.

than on the backbenches in the House of Commons, but the Edwardian Liberal Party contained no fewer than twenty-three MPs who had not simply supported the Boer War but actually served with the British forces in South Africa. Indeed, Liberal MPs sitting in Parliament during the decade preceding 1914 could boast first-hand experience of military conflict in campaigns from Egypt to China, Mashonaland, the Sudan, Burma, the North-West Frontier of India, and even Canada, where Sir Charles Rose, the MP for Newmarket between 1903 and 1913, had served as an officer in the Montreal Garrison Artillery during the Fenian raid of 1870.¹²

Even on the radical wing of the party, an absolute commitment to pacifism was rare. Liberals generally conceded the legitimacy of wars of national defence, and most also accepted, at least implicitly, the concept of the ‘just war’. The historian George Peabody Gooch, for example, who was elected MP for Bath in the Liberal landslide of 1906, had been a strong critic of the war in South Africa. Yet, in an essay published in 1901, he had frankly acknowledged that war could be justified when it was waged in resistance to ‘Turkish standards of government’.¹³ This principle could be extended to justify British intervention

¹² Altogether, twenty-nine veterans of military campaigns sat as Liberal MPs in the House of Commons between 1900 and 1914. They were: E. N. Bennett, W. L. S. Churchill, J. P. Dickson-Poynder, E. M. Dunne, E. E. Fiennes, A. C. Gardner, C. A. Grenfell, C. H. C. Guest, F. E. Guest, I. C. Guest, I. J. C. Herbert, P. H. Illingworth, G. Kemp, M. Kincaid-Smith, G. McMicking, A. C. Murray, I. Philipps, D. V. Pirie, A. L. Renton, G. S. Robertson, C. D. Rose, R. H. St Maur, J. E. B. Seely, A. L. Stanley, J. Ward, W. Waring, J. C. Wedgwood, C. H. W. Wilson, and G. G. Wilson.

¹³ G. P. Gooch, ‘Imperialism’, in C. F. G. Masterman (ed.), *The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England, with an Essay on Imperialism* (London, 1901), 338.

on behalf of oppressed peoples in other states; W. E. Gladstone himself had been prepared to countenance the threat of force against Turkey in response to the Armenian massacres of 1895–6.¹⁴

Hostility towards the Ottoman Empire remained well-entrenched within the Edwardian Liberal Party, and came to a head early in 1906, when Turkish troops occupied the town of Tabah, within the Egyptian territory administered by Britain. The official British response to the Turkish incursion was firm but measured. Sir Edward Grey explored the usual diplomatic channels in search of a solution, while British troops were despatched to reinforce the local Egyptian garrison as a precautionary measure. The Liberal press, however, adopted a remarkably bellicose tone during the crisis. The *Daily News*, which had been outspoken in its opposition to the Boer War following its purchase by the cocoa magnate George Cadbury, now pushed for a hard line to be taken against Turkey and insisted that ‘no weakness should be shown by Great Britain’ when dealing with the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵ An editorial on 5 May expressed ‘feelings of frank repugnance’ for the Sultan, and warned that ‘our desire for peace co-exists with an implacable rejection of his audacious [territorial] claims’. The newspaper applauded the British government’s decision to proceed with military preparations, even while diplomatic efforts were on-going, and insisted above all that it remained ‘a fixed maxim of Liberal policy’ that ‘no foot of earth once taken from the Turk ever reverts to him’.¹⁶ Such stridency horrified the anti-imperialist and former diplomat Wilfrid Scawen

¹⁴ Martin Ceadel, ‘Gladstone and a Liberal Theory of International Relations’, in Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman (eds.), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew* (Oxford, 2006), 77–86.

¹⁵ *Daily News*, 30 Apr. 1906.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 5 May 1906.

Blunt, who accused the newspaper of ‘preaching a crusade’.¹⁷ Blunt meant this in the medieval sense of a war between religions. But Liberal hostility towards the Sultan also fits a definition of ‘crusading’ advanced more recently by Martin Ceadel as a particular way of thinking about war and peace, encompassing a willingness to use armed force to promote ideological ends (in this case the spread of Liberal values and the defeat of autocracy and oppression).¹⁸

Blunt was even more dismayed by the attitude of the *Tribune*, the short-lived Liberal daily newspaper whose staff included such radical luminaries as L. T. Hobhouse, J. A. Hobson, and F. W. Hirst. The most striking aspect of the *Tribune*’s coverage of the Tabah crisis was the casual manner in which it discussed the possibility of a military confrontation. As the newspaper assured its readers on 2 May, if Britain should find it necessary to expel the Turks from Tabah by force, ‘the operation should present no serious difficulties’. The tone here was not the moral outrage and indignation of the *Daily News* but rather an almost complacent confidence in the efficacy of force as a tool of diplomacy in the Near East: ‘Strong words by mere repetition have lost their significance’, declared the newspaper, ‘and it

¹⁷ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888–1914*, 2 vols. (London, 1919), ii. 143.

¹⁸ Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford, 1987), 19–42. ‘Crusading’ in this sense is distinct from other political theories justifying war, such as ‘defencism’ (defined as an acceptance of the need to prepare for, and if necessary engage in, wars of a defensive nature) and ‘militarism’ (defined as a belief in war not simply as a means to an end but as an ideal state, offering an escape from the ‘stagnation’ supposedly engendered by periods of prolonged peace). Ceadel notes, however, that these categories represent ‘ideal types’, and in practice usually blur into one another at the margins.

is necessary, because it is usual, to underline them with some sort of “demonstration”.¹⁹

News that the British government had delivered a formal ultimatum to the Ottoman authorities was, accordingly, greeted without any great alarm:

The Turks have no point of honour in the European sense. A raised fist is not in their view an insult; it is simply a danger. An ultimatum stirs no association in their mind of challenges or gauntlets: it is simply an intimation that their adversary is in earnest. . . . [S]ince the Turks prefer to be threatened in plain language we have no choice but to adapt ourselves regretfully to their singular habits.²⁰

The newspaper continued to treat the risk of military escalation with insouciance, remarking on 7 May that:

There is no question of going to war. A great Power does not nowadays go to war with Turkey; it coerces. Turkey is not, so to speak, within the scope of the international duelling code. One may be obliged to use the fist, but one does not do Turkey the honour of ‘calling her out’.²¹

This point was illustrated by a cartoon in which a confident John Bull squared off against the Sultan in a wrestling ring—a reference to a recent sporting bout in which the Russian wrestler George Hackenschmidt had taken less than two minutes to defeat Ahmed Madrali, known as

¹⁹ *Tribune*, 2 May 1906.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 5 May 1906.

²¹ *Ibid.* 7 May 1906.

the ‘Terrible Turk’—leading Wilfrid Blunt to lament that the *Tribune* had become ‘extravagantly jingo’ in its posturing.²²

David Lloyd George would later play to this tradition of anti-Ottoman indignation and contempt as part of his transformation from arch-radical to wartime super-patriot. In a fiery speech delivered at the City Temple in London in November 1914, days after Britain declared war on Turkey, he denounced the Ottomans as ‘a human cancer, a creeping agony in the flesh of the lands which they misgovern, rotting every fibre of life’, and expressed his satisfaction, now ‘the great day of reckoning has come upon the nations’, that ‘the Turk is to be called to a final account for his long record of infamy against humanity’.²³ Even before 1914, however, Liberal hostility towards the Ottoman Empire revealed the limits to the pacifism professed by many in the party.

At the same time, the Edwardian Liberal commitment to military ‘retrenchment’ remained ambiguous and contested. It certainly did not imply a general hostility towards the armed forces. In addition to the veterans of overseas military campaigns noted above, the Liberal benches in the House of Commons seated a great many men who could boast first-hand experience of military service through membership of Britain’s auxiliary armed forces—the Volunteers, yeomanry, and militia, which were reformed by Richard Haldane into the new Territorial Force and Special Reserve after 1907. Altogether, no fewer than

²² Blunt, *My Diaries*, ii. 143.

²³ David Lloyd George, *Through Terror to Triumph: Speeches and Pronouncements of the Right Hon. David Lloyd George, M.P., Since the Beginning of the War*, ed. F. L. Stevenson (London, 1915), 54–5.

eighty-six Liberal MPs sitting in in the Commons between 1900 and 1914 had worn military uniform.²⁴

Membership of the auxiliary forces did not in itself necessarily entail any deep commitment to military affairs. Training in the old yeomanry and the Volunteer Force in particular could be extremely perfunctory.²⁵ To a certain extent, ‘soldiering’ in Edwardian Britain represented a social duty as much as a professional vocation, and for many MPs it was simply a part of constituency life, one of the ‘customary duties of a country gentleman’, comparable to service as a Justice of the Peace.²⁶ Indeed, such service was by no means incompatible with sympathy for the cause of military retrenchment. Some soldier-MPs, such as the Boer War veteran Edward Dunne, were perfectly willing after 1906 to lend their support to calls for reductions in the Army Estimates.²⁷ In other cases, talk about ‘retrenchment’ could imply a commitment to ‘efficiency’ rather than to large-scale reductions in Britain’s military strength. Yet some Liberals who possessed military experience before 1914 were clearly convinced anti-militarists in their politics. Charles Buxton, who joined the Devon Yeomanry after moving to the county to contest the parliamentary seat of Ashburton, would later become one of the most prominent advocates of a negotiated peace during the

²⁴ For a full list of names, see Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902–1914* (Basingstoke, 2013), 185.

²⁵ David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c.1870–2000* (Oxford, 2005), 223; Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training, and Deploying the British Army, 1902–1914* (Oxford, 2012), 138–9.

²⁶ See e.g. the obituary of Wentworth Beaumont, the Liberal MP for Hexham from 1895 to 1907, published in *The Times*, 13 Dec. 1923.

²⁷ *Hansard*, 1906, cliii, 1487.

Great War, and an early member of the Union of Democratic Control.²⁸ H. C. F. Luttrell, who had served in the Rifle Brigade and sat as MP for Tavistock until he was defeated at the general election of December 1910, was so opposed to British entry into the war in 1914 that he left the Liberals to join the Independent Labour Party.²⁹

Other Liberals, however, expressed a keen interest in matters of national defence. Although not himself a military veteran, Sir Charles Dilke, the radical MP for the Forest of Dean from 1892 to 1911, was widely acknowledged as one of the pre-eminent parliamentary authorities on military affairs. He was the author of a number of works during the 1890s on defence questions, including *Problems of Greater Britain* and *Imperial Defence*—the latter written in collaboration with Spenser Wilkinson, who would later become the first Chichele Professor of Military History at the University of Oxford—and was an important influence in the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence in 1904.³⁰ A number of Liberals at Westminster were enthusiastic supporters of military innovation and the adoption of new technologies for the purposes of national defence. By 1912 two Liberal MPs—B. S. Strauss and Sir Ivor Philipps—sat on the executive committee of the Aerial League of the British Empire, a new pressure group whose avowed objective was ‘to secure and maintain for the Empire the same supremacy in the air as we now enjoy on the sea’. Another MP, W. H. Lever, was a prominent financial backer of the League.³¹ Their colleague Sir Charles Rose

²⁸ Marvin Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War* (Oxford, 1971), 30, 79–80.

²⁹ *Labour Leader*, 1 Oct. 1914.

³⁰ Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Problems of Greater Britain*, 2 vols. (London, 1890), ii. 560–4; id. and Spenser Wilkinson, *Imperial Defence* (London, 1892), 203–27; David Nicholls, *The Lost Prime Minister: A Life of Sir Charles Dilke* (London, 1995), 269.

³¹ *The Times*, 5 June 1909.

was a member of the executive committee of the Royal Aero Club, who worked hard to convince the government to support the development of aeroplanes for military purposes.³²

Some Liberals supported a more radical and controversial departure in defence policy. In 1901 a lawyer and self-professed 'Liberal Imperialist', George F. Shee, published a polemical book calling for the establishment of a system of compulsory military service in order to create a 'pan-Britannic militia' to defend Britain and its colonies.³³ This work, *The Briton's First Duty: The Case for Conscription*, found a ready audience among readers concerned by the inefficiencies in Britain's armed forces seemingly revealed during the Boer War, and worried about the supposed vulnerability of the British Isles to foreign invasion. These concerns found political expression in 1902 with the formation of a new pressure group, the National Service League (NSL), to campaign for the adoption of a system of universal military training for the purposes of home defence. The NSL has often been seen as an organization on the radical or reactionary right of British politics; the Edwardian Liberal polemicist J. A. Farrer derided it as 'nothing more than the military wing of the Tory Party'.³⁴

³² Nuffield College, Oxford, Mottistone Papers, 19, fos. 34–6, 38–55, 73–5.

³³ George Richard Francis Shee, *The Briton's First Duty: The Case for Conscription* (London, 1901), pp. xii–xiii.

³⁴ James Anson Farrer, *Liberalism and the National Service League* (London, 1911), 17; Denis Hayes, *Conscription Conflict: The Conflict of Ideas in the Struggle For and Against Military Conscription in Britain Between the Years 1901 and 1939* (London, 1949), 39; Anne Summers, 'The Character of Edwardian Nationalism: Three Popular Leagues', in Paul M. Kennedy and Anthony Nicholls (eds.), *Nationalist and Racist Movements in Britain and Germany before 1914* (London, 1981), 68–87; R. T. Stearn, 'The National Service League: Lord Roberts and the Campaign for Compulsory Military Training', *Soldiers of the Queen: The Journal of the Victorian Military Society*, no. 125 (June, 2006), 23–31.

Yet, in fact, a number of Liberals came to occupy positions of leadership within the organization. Shee himself became secretary of the League's executive committee, and for nine years served as one of the driving forces of the national organization, as well as editing the League's periodical, the *National Service Journal* (renamed the *Nation in Arms* in 1906). Another Liberal to achieve prominence within the League was G. G. Coulton, Birkbeck Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History at Trinity College, Cambridge, who sat on the NSL's general council. In 1914 Coulton published a tract entitled *True Liberalism and Compulsory Service*, which argued that the League deserved Liberal support because its programme promised to create a more 'democratic' system of military recruitment than that which currently operated in Britain.³⁵ Although not prepared to support a comprehensive programme of military conscription, J. A. Spender, the Liberal editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, was willing to co-operate with the NSL in advocating the introduction of military training in state-funded schools.³⁶

The campaign for conscription even came to receive support from a handful of Liberals in Parliament. Sir Edward Tennant, MP for Salisbury and Asquith's brother-in-law, was an early backer of the NSL who soon joined Shee on the League's executive committee.³⁷ In July 1908 Malcolm Kincaid-Smith, a veteran of the Boer War who had been elected Liberal MP for Stratford-on-Avon in the general election of 1906, introduced a 'National Military Training Bill' in the House of Commons, which would provide for periods of compulsory military training for all male British citizens over the age of 18, with exemptions for Members of Parliament, ministers of religion, criminals, habitual drunkards,

³⁵ G. G. Coulton, *True Liberalism and Compulsory Service* (London, 1914), 34–5.

³⁶ J. A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics*, 2 vols. (London, 1927), i. 197–9.

³⁷ Bodleian Library, MS Milner, dep 34, fo. 31: Shee to Milner, 28 Jan. 1908; *The Times*, 30 June 1910.

and other persons deemed ‘undesirable’ for the army. The bill was heavily defeated in the Commons, by 250 votes to 34, but Kincaid-Smith was supported by four fellow Liberals—Tennant, J. D. Rees, H. F. B. Lynch, and H. G. Beaumont.³⁸ Nine months later Kincaid-Smith announced his intention to resign his parliamentary seat and fight a by-election so that ‘the question of national military training can be brought without further loss of time to a practical issue’.³⁹ In April 1913 the Newmarket MP Sir Charles Rose was among the sponsors of a private members bill that proposed to introduce compulsory training in the Territorial Force.⁴⁰

These men were undoubtedly operating on the fringes of the Edwardian Liberal Party. An overwhelming majority of Liberal MPs were opposed to conscription, and all attempts to introduce compulsory military service by parliamentary legislation during the decade before 1914 failed. Kincaid-Smith’s decision to fight a by-election on the issue in 1909 led to him being dropped by his local Liberal Association and he finished in a humiliating third place once the votes had been counted. Yet the principle of compulsory military service was not beyond the pale of Liberal politics to the extent that is often assumed. Indeed, a number of Liberal Cabinet ministers proved remarkably open-minded on the question. Although Richard Haldane had consistently defended his Territorial Force scheme as the ‘last alternative’ to conscription, he declared in April 1913 that his opposition to compulsory service was based on grounds of practicality rather than principle.⁴¹ Haldane’s successor as War Secretary, J. E. B. Seely (himself a veteran of the Boer War, and a former Unionist who had joined the Liberals in 1904 over the issues of tariff reform and ‘Chinese slavery’) had been among the

³⁸ *Hansard*, 1908, cxci, 1480–6.

³⁹ *The Times*, 6 Apr. 1909.

⁴⁰ *Hansard*, 1913, li, 1546–7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 1913, xiv, 209.

founding members of the National Service League in 1902, and had declared before the Royal United Services Institute in February that year his belief that ‘it should be obligatory for every male in this country to be trained to arms’.⁴² In February 1903 he had seconded an amendment to the King’s Speech, calling for every man in the nation to receive military training.⁴³ By the time he joined the Liberal Cabinet in 1912 Seely had moved to distance himself from the NSL’s programme, but he still professed his belief that ‘it is the duty of every young man to give up some portion of his leisure time *of his own free will* to the service of his country’.⁴⁴

More remarkable still was the attitude of David Lloyd George, who in the summer of 1910 used a conference between government and opposition leaders, intended to break the political deadlock caused by the House of Lords’ rejection of the budget the previous year, as cover to launch a bold and secret initiative aiming to establish a coalition government. A new cross-party ministry might transcend partisan divisions over trade tariffs, Irish Home Rule, Lords’ reform, and Welsh disestablishment, in order to address the more pressing priorities of social reform, imperial defence, and ‘national efficiency’, and as part of this deal, Lloyd George proposed the introduction of a system of compulsory military service, under which ‘we might aim at raising 500,000 armed militia to supplement our Regular Army to provide against contingencies’.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the gravity of traditional party loyalties proved too great

⁴² *Nation in Arms*, Apr. 1911, p. 171.

⁴³ *Hansard*, 1903, cxviii, 534.

⁴⁴ Nuffield College, Oxford, Mottistone Papers, Box 19, fos. 282–7: Seely to Fred Maddison.

⁴⁵ House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers, G/46/3/81; John Grigg, *Lloyd George: The People’s Champion, 1902–11* (2nd edn. London, 1991), 243–76; Robert James Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition: The Politics of Social-Imperialism, 1900–1918* (Princeton, 1975), 375–86; Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left*, 107–109.

for this coalition proposal to get off the ground. Subsequent historians have tended to deprecate the seriousness of Lloyd George's interest in the militia proposal, seeing it simply as a tactical concession intended to buy Unionist support for the rest of his agenda.⁴⁶ Yet the Chancellor continued to flirt with the idea of cross-party cooperation in order to effect a radical reform and expansion of the nation's armed forces, and by February 1913 H. A. Gwynne, the editor of the *Morning Post*, was reporting to Austen Chamberlain that Lloyd George, together with Winston Churchill, was again taking soundings about the possibility of a conference with the opposition leadership on the question of national service.⁴⁷ A few months later Lloyd George, Churchill, and Haldane joined together at a meeting of the Cabinet to declare themselves in favour of establishing a system of compulsory military training for the Territorial Force.⁴⁸

Such proposals made no practical headway at this time. Indeed, it was only after seventeen months of war in Europe that conscription was finally introduced in Britain, in January 1916. During the decade before the outbreak of the Great War, as during most of the nineteenth century, the lion's share of British defence expenditure was claimed not by the army but by the Royal Navy, the 'Senior Service'. Between 1906 and 1913, naval expenditure in Britain increased from £31.4 million to £48.8 million.⁴⁹ It was this spending that so concerned the members of the Reduction of Armaments Committee in Parliament.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Russell Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899–1914* (Oxford, 1971), 182–90; Bentley B. Gilbert, *Lloyd George: A Political Life*, 2 vols. (London, 1987), i. 412–21.

⁴⁷ Austen Chamberlain, *Politics from Inside: An Epistolary Chronicle* (London, 1936), 522.

⁴⁸ Edward David (ed.), *Inside Asquith's Cabinet: From the Diaries of Charles Hobhouse* (London, 1977), 134.

⁴⁹ Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, 7.

The pre-war Liberal government had certainly not come to office with any plans for profligacy in naval spending. In a widely reported speech at the Albert Hall in December 1905, Campbell-Bannerman had denounced the growth in armaments as a ‘great danger to the peace of the world’, and he went on to make a sincere attempt to reduce the international competition in armaments at the peace conference at The Hague in 1907.⁵⁰ The Edwardian revolution in naval technology championed by the First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, initially seemed to offer the prospect of economies in defence spending. Fisher’s fast and powerful new battle cruisers were intended to be capable of performing the work of both a battleship and first-class cruiser. When complemented by coastal defence submarines, it was envisaged that the new vessels could be built in smaller numbers than the capital ships of the traditional battle fleet, leading to substantial savings in construction costs, manning, and maintenance. Indeed, for the three fiscal years from 1906–7 to 1908–9, the Liberal government was able to draft navy estimates that were on average some 15 per cent below those of 1904–5. By 1909, however, the decision of the German Empire to embark upon the construction of a powerful North Sea fleet, and the increasing willingness of other European powers to build ‘Dreadnoughts’ of their own, left the British government under almost irresistible pressure to increase the scale of their shipbuilding programme.⁵¹ Senior Liberal ministers responded to this challenge pragmatically, while continuing to resist ‘extravagance’ in naval expenditure. As Asquith declared: ‘No [budget] surplus however large would justify the laying down of a

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 22 Dec. 1905.

⁵¹ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London, 1980), 410–70; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889–1914* (London, 1993), 57, 111–15, 185–96, 330–7; Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* (Columbia, SC, 1999), 91–126.

ship that was not needed for security, and no deficit can justify the failure to lay down any number of ships that are so needed.’⁵²

There were elements in Edwardian British politics, however, who regarded the Liberal Cabinet’s naval provision as parsimonious, and continued to push for greater levels of spending on the fleet. Pressure groups such as the Navy League and the Imperial Maritime League provided a ‘navalist’ counterpoint to the National Service League’s argument that national security could only be guaranteed by the creation of a mass conscript army. Like the NSL, the navalist leagues have typically been viewed by historians as enclaves of right-wing—even ‘proto-fascist’—politics, which often operated effectively as auxiliaries to the official Unionist Party.⁵³ This was, to a considerable extent, true in the case of the Imperial Maritime League. But the Navy League, by far the largest and most prominent of the Edwardian navalist groups, deliberately positioned itself as a bipartisan organization, and succeeded in attracting a significant amount of support from Liberal circles. By 1908 there were 114 MPs sitting in Parliament who were affiliated to the League; thirty-six of them were Liberals, and another, Alexander Cross, the Liberal Unionist MP for Camlachie, would join the Liberal Party in May the following year.⁵⁴ Liberals were particularly well represented

⁵² Bodleian Library, MS Asquith 21, fo. 167: Undated memorandum by Asquith.

⁵³ Arno J. Mayer, ‘Domestic Causes of the First World War’, in Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern (eds.), *The Responsibility of Power: Essays in Honour of Hajo Holborn* (London, 1968), 291–2; Summers, ‘The Character of Edwardian Nationalism’, 68–87; Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (Oxford, 1990), 4, 29; Steven E. Lobell, ‘War is Politics: Offensive Realism, Domestic Politics, and Security Strategies’, *Security Studies*, 12/2 (Winter, 2002–3), 183–6.

⁵⁴ *Navy League Journal* (June 1908), 168–9.

within the Navy League leadership. Of the nine sitting MPs who were members of the League's executive committee in 1908, five were Liberals.⁵⁵ Five more Liberal MPs sat on the committee between 1904 and 1910, and two served as vice presidents of the League.⁵⁶ Other Liberals were affiliated to local Navy League branches, with the Port of Manchester branch boasting a particularly impressive number of MPs among its supporters.⁵⁷ Altogether, at least forty-eight Liberal or Lib-Lab MPs during the decade before 1914 had some formal connection to the League.⁵⁸

Liberal enthusiasm for the Royal Navy was driven by a number of factors. Whilst radicals within the party tended to regard all expenditure on armaments as wasteful and 'unproductive', many Liberals were aware of the importance of naval contracts to employment in dockyard towns. During 1908 Charles McLaren and Christopher Furness, two Liberal MPs who also served as directors of Palmers Shipbuilding Company, actively lobbied the Admiralty for additional Navy contracts to be placed with the shipyards in Jarrow. Both men were well aware of the hardship and distress caused by a slump in commercial orders over the preceding year; as McLaren warned Reginald McKenna, the First Lord of the Admiralty, 'the condition of trade in general is very bad. The whole town of 40,000 inhabitants is dependent on our ship-yard, and would be ruined if we had to close our

⁵⁵ These men were Godfrey Baring, Carlyon Bellairs, Freeman Freeman-Thomas, H. F. B. Lynch, and A. E. W. Mason.

⁵⁶ C. P. Allen, J. E. B. Seely, J. H. Yoxall, R. W. Perks, and the Lib-Lab MP John Ward sat on the committee; Bellairs and Alfred Mond served as vice presidents. See *Navy League Journal* (Feb. 1904), 60; *Navy League Journal* (Dec. 1909), 353, 356.

⁵⁷ Navy League, *List of Officers, Branches, &c.* (1911).

⁵⁸ See Matthew Johnson, 'The Liberal Party and the Navy League in Britain before the Great War', *Twentieth Century British History* 22/2 (2011).

gates'.⁵⁹ Similar concerns were voiced by Winston Churchill after his appointment as President of the Board of Trade that same year, when he pleaded with McKenna to find some Admiralty work to relieve the 'acute and increasing' unemployment in the engineering and shipbuilding trades on the Clyde and Tyne.⁶⁰ Party-political considerations were also important in this context; appeals by the Poplar MP Sydney Buxton for McKenna to find new Admiralty contracts for the Thames shipyards in 1909, for example, were accompanied by the warning that it would be 'rather damaging to us down in the East End if you refused'.⁶¹

At the same time, the Royal Navy represented a manifestation of British power that was particularly acceptable to Liberal sensibilities. A fleet, no matter how powerful, could never be used as an instrument of political despotism, and in this sense the Navy remained free from the suspicion and hostility with which English radicals had regarded standing armies since the seventeenth century.⁶² Indeed, after the system of naval 'impressment' fell into disuse following the Napoleonic wars, the fleet, for all its financial expense, could be maintained without any great interference in the lives of ordinary citizens, and for some Liberals the attraction of naval supremacy as the cornerstone of Britain's national defence was precisely that it seemed to offer 'the safest guard against the system of conscription'.⁶³

⁵⁹ Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), Cambridge, McKenna Papers, MCKN, 3/3, fo. 4, McLaren to McKenna, 27 June 1908; MCKN, 3/12, fo. 1, McLaren to McKenna, 30 Apr. 1908; MCKN, 3/12, fo. 5, Furness to McKenna, 26 Dec. 1908.

⁶⁰ McKenna papers, MCKN, 3/20, fo. 1, Churchill to McKenna (undated); fos. 8–9, Churchill to McKenna, 19 Sept. 1908.

⁶¹ McKenna papers, MCKN, 3/3, fo. 10, Buxton to McKenna, 4 Oct. 1909.

⁶² Julian Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England, 1689–1727* (Oxford, 2000), 156–8; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), 687–8.

⁶³ *Hansard*, 1909, ii. 1105.

Naval power could also be embraced as the essential guarantor of that most sacred of Liberal principles, Free Trade, since it was the fleet alone that kept the shipping lanes open and secure. As the radical journalist W. T. Stead had observed in 1884, ‘the maintenance of an undisputed and indisputable ascendancy on every sea is the indispensable corollary of the abolition of the Corn Laws’.⁶⁴

All of these considerations worked to mitigate Liberal impulses towards naval retrenchment. Those Liberals who were affiliated to the Navy League, however, were conspicuous in their enthusiasm for maintaining the maximum possible measure of British naval power. They opposed radical hopes that the government would pursue the cause of naval disarmament at the 1907 peace conference at The Hague, and fiercely resisted any move by Cabinet ministers that might compromise Britain’s commitment to maintaining a ‘two-power standard’ in naval strength. Indeed, a number of Liberal Navy Leaguers were prepared to vote against their own party leaders on this question, and in March 1909 two Liberal navalist MPs—Carlyon Bellairs and Malcolm Kincaid-Smith—went so far as to support a Unionist vote of censure against the government for neglecting the nation’s naval defences.⁶⁵

Liberal navalists also resented the presumption with which ‘Little Navy’ radicals claimed to speak for the wider Liberal movement. Bellairs insisted that cutting down the Navy ‘would be contrary to all the traditions of the party’, and argued that those elements pushing for reductions in the naval estimates ‘no more represent Liberalism in this matter than the froth of an effervescing liquid which comes to the surface represents the liquid itself’.⁶⁶ A practical test of this assertion came in March 1908, when Parliament considered a

⁶⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1884.

⁶⁵ *Hansard*, 1909, iii, 146

⁶⁶ *Commercial Intelligence*, 14 Feb. 1906.

resolution moved by the Falkirk MP J. A. Murray Macdonald, urging that ‘reductions be made in expenditure on armaments, and effect be given to the policy of retrenchment and reform to which the Government is pledged’. Only fifty-seven Liberals supported the motion.⁶⁷ Despite this apparent vindication, Bellairs’s own claim to represent the ‘true’ spirit of Liberalism remained questionable; by 1914 he, along with his fellow Navy Leaguers J. D. Rees and A. L. Renton, had left the Liberal Party and joined the Unionists, having taken umbrage at some of the social, fiscal, and constitutional policies being pursued by their party leaders. Indeed, Bellairs’s unorthodox career would later bring him into the orbit of Oswald Mosley’s New Party, and ultimately into the British League of Fascists.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the failure of Murray Macdonald’s motion to secure support from a majority of Liberal MPs in March 1908 demonstrated the extent to which ‘retrenchment’ remained, for many Liberals, a vague watchword rather than an absolute or immutable principle. In the last resort many within the party simply deferred to their political leaders on questions of defence. As the Knutsford MP Alfred King remarked, even those who were worried about the burden of armaments expenditure would usually accept ‘anything advised by the Admiralty and which is approved of by the leaders of the Liberal Party’.⁶⁹

More broadly, if the sabre-rattling of the radical press at the time of the Tabah crisis revealed the limits of Liberal ‘pacifism’ during these years, the involvement of a significant number of Liberals in organizations such as the Navy League, the Aerial League of the British Empire, and even the National Service League stands as an important reminder of the extent to which the Edwardian Liberal Party remained a diverse coalition. Within this coalition, those whom A. J. P. Taylor described as the ‘trouble makers’—the radical

⁶⁷ *Hansard*, 1908, clxxxv. 469–72.

⁶⁸ Johnson, ‘The Liberal Party and the Navy League’, 154.

⁶⁹ *The Navy* (Feb. 1910), 42.

opponents of armaments, imperialism, and war, who have featured so prominently in the historiography of Edwardian Liberalism—struggled for political influence against rival elements who believed that the Liberal Party should take a strong line on questions of national and imperial defence.

This did not mean that many British Liberals wanted, or even expected, a war with Germany during the early twentieth century. The bellicosity of the radical response to Turkish interference in Egypt in 1906 was arguably most revealing as a reflection of the peculiar position of the Ottoman Empire among the Great Powers. As the *Tribune* observed, ‘the relations of Christendom with Turkey, however much one may deplore the fact, still betray something of the chronic antagonism of medieval times’.⁷⁰ A willingness to threaten the use of force against the Sultan did not imply that Liberals would lightly entertain the prospect of war against another European power. Edwardian Liberal attitudes towards the Wilhelmine Reich remained highly ambivalent; admiration of German culture, science, and literature co-existed with a suspicion of Junkerdom and ‘Blood-and-Iron’ militarism.⁷¹ As an enemy of Liberal values, however, the European power that in British eyes most closely resembled the Ottoman Empire—in its oppression of religious and ethnic minorities, and in the authoritarian and reactionary nature of its government—was not Germany but Britain’s diplomatic partner, the Tsarist autocracy in Russia.⁷² Despite the strong line taken by Lloyd George in his famous Mansion House speech of July 1911, Liberal ministers were genuinely

⁷⁰ *Tribune*, 2 May 1906.

⁷¹ Richard Scully, *British Images of Germany: Admiration, Antagonism and Ambivalence, 1860-1914* (Basingstoke, 2012); Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwarth (eds.), *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain: Essays on cultural affinity* (Oxford, 2008).

⁷² Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894–1917* (Oxford, 1995), 278–80.

alarmed by the prospect of war with Germany at the time of the Agadir Crisis, and the years that followed saw a sincere attempt, led by Grey, Haldane, and Lewis Harcourt, at securing a diplomatic détente with Germany, in particular over the future disposal of Portuguese colonies in Africa and over the construction of the Baghdad railway.⁷³ The prospect of an Anglo-German rapprochement was widely welcomed in Liberal circles. Indeed, outside the Cabinet, those Liberals who were most suspicious of Germany, and in particular the Liberal members of the Navy League who were worried about the threat posed by the German High Seas Fleet, actually saw their influence within the party decline during the years before 1914 as their parliamentary strength was reduced—a result of the curious geographical concentration of Liberal navalists in marginal constituencies which had been captured in the landslide of 1906 but were re-taken by the Unionists in the general elections of 1910.⁷⁴

An appreciation of the ambivalence and ambiguity that characterized Liberal thinking about war and national defence during the early twentieth century does, however, offer an important perspective on the Liberal response to the crisis of 1914. The key episode here, as historians have long recognized, was the German invasion of Belgium. This mattered less in determining the British decision for war than it did in rallying Liberal opinion behind that decision. As Zara Steiner has observed, despite Britain's vaunted system of parliamentary government and Cabinet responsibility, the British Foreign Secretary in practice enjoyed more political freedom of action than did his German counterpart. For Grey, as for other key British decision-makers, when the final moment of crisis arrived, the over-riding consideration was the calculation that German hegemony in Europe—and particularly western Europe—would pose an unacceptable threat to Britain's interests. In this calculation,

⁷³ Steiner and Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 153–8.

⁷⁴ Johnson, 'The Liberal Party and the Navy League', 151–2.

the views of radical backbenchers counted for little.⁷⁵ Yet the response of the wider Liberal Party to the decision for war still mattered politically. In this sense, it is conspicuous that Germany's actions in August 1914 took precisely the form that might most swiftly reconcile Liberal opinion in Britain to the case for intervention. The violation of Belgian neutrality revealed a contempt for international treaty obligations and for the rights of small nations that seemingly exposed the German Reich to the world as an enemy of civilization—an enemy which, like the Ottoman Empire, should be resisted and opposed by all good Liberals.

No politician grasped this aspect of the crisis better than Lloyd George. The Chancellor shared Grey's concerns about the danger to Britain should Germany achieve supremacy in Europe, but it remained difficult for him politically to endorse any war apparently being waged in defence of the 'balance of power'. By presenting the war instead as a moral struggle against a 'barbaric' enemy, Lloyd George was able to throw his support behind Britain's military intervention on the Continent without overtly compromising his radical credentials. This case became still easier to make after Turkey joined the war on the side of the Central Powers, and Lloyd George was quick to draw explicit parallels between the German and Ottoman empires as enemies of civilized—and of *Christian*—values. As he declared in November 1914:

In this gigantic battle between right and wrong, it is meet that the Turks should march into action shoulder to shoulder with the devastators of Belgium. They have made themselves fit comrades—the ravagers of Armenia and the desolators of Flanders—the Turk of the East and the Turk of the West—both ruthless military empires with only one god, and that is violence. Their

⁷⁵ Steiner and Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 248–9.

downfall will bring gladness, security, and peace to a world which has for generations been oppressed and darkened by their grim presence.⁷⁶

This was a war which many Liberals could support. Indeed, by November 1914, twenty-nine Liberal MPs had gone so far as to secure commissions in the armed forces in order to take part in this struggle personally.⁷⁷ If the Edwardian Liberal Party had been truly and uncompromisingly committed to ‘peace’ and ‘retrenchment’, the actions of these men would have been almost unthinkable. In truth, however, Liberal acceptance of the case for war in August 1914 fitted into a well-established political tradition. Liberal thinking on war and national defence had always been ambiguous and contested. Those radicals who sought to enshrine an opposition to war and a commitment to reductions in the cost of national defence as the core of the Liberal programme not only failed to shape the policy of the government, they also remained unrepresentative of the Liberal Party as a whole. That party had always been a diverse coalition, containing a sizeable minority who took a keen active interest in questions of national defence, and in which ‘pacifistic’ instincts had long co-existed with strong ‘crusading’ impulses. The idea that the outbreak of the Great War represented a total and catastrophic defeat for the ‘principles of 1906’ is thus too simplistic. British Liberals had not wanted war in 1914. But they were certainly not incapable of responding robustly to the military and diplomatic crisis that developed so rapidly during the summer of that year.

⁷⁶ Lloyd George, *Through Terror to Triumph*, 55.

⁷⁷ *The Times*, 11 Nov. 1914.